

The Open Couple

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Socialist Stories*

Interior of an apartment. A MAN in his forties is knocking on the door of the bathroom. His face is lit by a spotlight.

MAN: Don't be silly, Antonia. Come out – say something.

What are you doing? Listen – maybe you're right, it's my fault – but please come out. Open the door. We'll talk things over – OK? Christ, why do you have to turn everything into a tragedy? Can't we work things out like rational people? *(He looks through the keyhole)* What are you up to? You're mad and you simply don't care – that's what's wrong with you.

A WOMAN appears at the side of the stage. She is also lit. The rest of the stage is in darkness.

WOMAN: The uncaring madwoman in there – actually it's the bathroom – is me. That other person – the guy who's yelling at me and begging me not to do anything foolish – is my husband –

MAN: *(goes on talking as if the WOMAN were in the bathroom)* Antonia, come out, please!

WOMAN: I'm taking a cocktail of pills. Mogadon, Optalidon, Femidol, Veronal, Cibalgina, four Nisidinetritate suppositories – all orally.

MAN: Say something, Antonia.

WOMAN: My husband's already called an ambulance. They'll break down the door.

MAN: The first-aid squad's on its way. They'll knock the door down. Christ – this is the third time.

WOMAN: The thing I can't stand about emergency treatment is having your stomach pumped. That damned tube down your throat – and then the dazed state you're in for days and the embarrassed looks everyone gives you. Making these vague idiotic comments – just to say something. And then, of course, they make me see the psychologist – pardon, the analyst. A prick who sits there looking at you in silence for two hours with his pipe in his mouth and then suddenly says: 'Do cry, please, do cry!'

MAN: Antonia, say something. Give a moan at least. Then at least I'll have an idea of what stage you're at. I'm going now and you won't see me again. (*He bends down to squint through the keyhole*)

WOMAN: Actually it's not the first time I've wanted to die.

MAN: Antonia! Don't swallow the yellow pills. They're for my asthma!

WOMAN: Another time I tried jumping out of the window. He grabbed me just when I was taking off. (*The WOMAN jumps onto the window-sill which has been brought onto the stage. The MAN grabs her ankle. The lights come on full*)

MAN: Please come down. Yes, you're right – I am a bastard but I promise you, it's the last time I'll put you in a situation like this.

WOMAN: Do you think I give a damn? Can't you understand I'm simply not interested in you – in your affairs – in your stupid women?

MAN: You mean – if they'd been intelligent you wouldn't have minded so much? Let's talk it over – on the floor. Come down.

WOMAN: No, I don't give a damn – I'm going to jump.

MAN: No!

WOMAN: Yes!

MAN: I'll break your ankle first.

WOMAN: Ow! (*She steps down from the window. Her husband hands her a crutch*)

WOMAN: (*to the audience*) And he really did break it, the idiot. A month with my leg in plaster! And everyone asking me: 'Have you been skiing?' God, was I angry. (*Limping, she puts down the crutch and from the drawer of the table or some other piece of furniture, takes out a gun*)

WOMAN: Another time I tried to shoot myself –

MAN: No, damn it, stop! (*The MAN makes a move to stop the WOMAN*) I haven't got a licence for it. Do you want to get me arrested?

WOMAN: (*Talks to the audience as if not involved in the action*) The reason I wanted to die was always the same. He didn't want me any more. He didn't love me any more. And the tragedy erupted every time I found out about my husband's latest affair.

MAN: (*Trying to take the gun away from the woman*) Try to be reasonable. With the others it's only a sexual thing – that's all.

WOMAN: Oh yes? and with me it isn't even sex any more.

MAN: But with you it's different. I've a tremendous respect for you.

WOMAN: Well you know what you can do with your respect! (*To the audience*) Yes, in this sort of situation I always get a tiny bit petty. But it was my husband's thoughtlessness that drove me up the wall. It couldn't go on like that. He hadn't made love to me for ages.

MAN: I don't know why you get a kick out of dragging everything out in public –

WOMAN: Oh, it pisses you off, eh? (*To the audience*) At first I thought maybe he was – overtired. (*She is about to cross in front of the window. Her husband who is looking out of the window stops her*)

MAN: Watch! You'll fall out!

WOMAN: No, I won't. There's the stage.

MAN: Yes, but the set ends here.

WOMAN: Right – but I'm a character in a play. I'm telling a story so I step out of character and I can step out of the set. *(To the audience)* I was saying – I thought maybe he was overtired and then I found out he had an extremely active sex-life with other people – naturally. And when I asked him to explain what had happened to him – 'Why don't you want me any more?' – he would find excuses. *(During the last part of her speech the MAN sits on the window-sill with his legs dangling)*

MAN: I would find excuses?

WOMAN: Yes, you. Once you even tried to lay the blame on politics.

MAN: Me?

WOMAN: Watch out, you'll fall!

MAN: I'm a character in a play, too!

WOMAN: No, you're not. You're on the fourth floor. *(To the audience)* I was saying that he tried to lay the blame on politics. He trotted out the bits about the political backlash. 'You've got to understand. How can I make love with all that's going on in this country? The unions –'

MAN: I didn't make it up about the backlash. It's a fact. Isn't it true that after the failure of all those struggles we went through we felt a bit frustrated – teetering on the brink. Look about you – what do you see? Cynicism.

WOMAN: Great! Some people get fed up with politics, dump their families and join the Hare Krishna lot – or else they chuck the office and open up a macrobiotic restaurant – and some of them set up warehouses for their own personal use. And it's all the fault of politics!

MAN: I admit it's a silly kind of hobby – trying to set up as a sexual athlete – But I swear it's different with you. You're the only woman I can't do without. You're the person I love

most in all the world – I feel really safe with you – like my mother.

WOMAN: I knew it! Your mother! Thank you very much! You've promoted me. Wives are like civil servants. When they're no use any more they kick them upstairs – make them director of some useless public corporation. Well, I'd rather be demoted to a one-night stand. Thrown on the bed and desired. I'm damn well not interested in being a warm blanket for you. Your huggy! Your mother! But don't you see what a bore you are? How you humiliate me? What am I supposed to be? An old boot you throw into the rubbish heap? Your mother! You'll see I can find men how and when I like.

MAN reacts.

WOMAN: It's no use putting on that ridiculous self-satisfied smile. I'll set up a brothel for you – yes, a brothel opposite where you work. I'll walk up and down on the pavement with a billboard. It'll have on it: 'Now available – the wife of Mr X – special offer – washed and scented. Handsome discounts.' Passed by the Board of Advertisers.

MAN: That's what I like about you – the way you always shit on my moments of honesty – of sincere feeling. I try to open up – to talk –

WOMAN: Then why don't you talk? Talk! Explain yourself. Explain to me what's got into you? All these stories – about bed – bed – bed. As if I didn't have a properly furnished house. (*While she is speaking the MAN tries to take the gun away*) And let go of this gun! I swear I won't shoot myself.

MAN: Word of honour?

WOMAN: Word of honour – I won't shoot myself. I don't feel like it any more. (*The MAN lets go*) I've changed my mind. It's you I'm going to shoot. (*She points the gun at him*)

MAN: Don't play silly tricks.

WOMAN: I'm not. (*She fires a shot that just misses him*)

MAN: Have you gone mad? You fired. You just missed me.
Look, we're only re-enacting things.

WOMAN: And I'm getting furious all over again just thinking about it.

MAN: Aren't I ever allowed to be a character in a play?

WOMAN: Shut up! Hands up! Face the wall. Stay like that.
I'm going to have a word with them – then I'll kill you. (*She turns to the public still pointing the gun at her husband*) Then one day he counter attacked.

MAN: And what did you do to stop things from falling apart?
And when I did something about it and looked for some affection elsewhere – some sort of stimulus – a bit of passion – something different – did you try to understand me?

WOMAN: Something different! (*To the public*) One day I discovered him – I was there in the house – washed and perfumed – I discovered him in the loo masturbating like a fifteen-year-old – out of hours. That was something different too!

MAN: That's mean! What sort of a kick do you get out of shitting all over me like this? OK, every so often I get into self-gratification. It's healthy. It relaxes me – especially when I'm tense and depressed. Like taking a sauna.

WOMAN: Yes – sauna my – Don't make me say rude things.

MAN: That's right, try not to. There are a lot of men –

WOMAN: (*Threatens him with the gun*) Shut up! (*To the audience*) As I was saying, my husband counter-attacked – the things he came up with! 'We must talk, you and me – we can only save our relationship if we change our cultural attitudes.' He trotted out all the hypocrisy that goes with bourgeois after-dinner talk – the most disgusting moralizing.

MAN: Of course! Faithfulness is a disgusting idea. Uncivilised! The idea of the married couple, of the family, is tied up with the defence of the immense economic benefits the patriarchy gets out of it. What you aren't able to understand is that I'm

perfectly capable of having a relationship with another woman and at the same time of being friends with you –

WOMAN: Did you think this all out yourself or did you have an old boy's reunion? I understand. Adultery's out. Nowadays we behave like modern people – civilised – politically aware. No! No! I can see myself and I won't stand for it. The bell rings. I go to the door. Who is it? Oh, it's my husband. 'Hello – and who is the nice young lady?' 'May I introduce you – this is my wife – my girl-friend.' 'How nice to meet you. Do come in. She's charming. How old are you? Only twenty-five years younger than my husband! That's marvellous. Do feel at home. Supper is ready. I hope you like our house. This is your bedroom. I mean our bedroom – but you're welcome to it. I'll sleep in my son's room. Or maybe it would be better if I went out. You'll feel freer then. I'll go to my sister's. No, don't worry – it's no trouble – somebody will keep me company. There's Norman – he's free too this evening because his wife's going out with – Have a nice supper and good night. Good luck and I hope it's a boy. No, not that – we have two boys already.' (*To the public*) And him – he can't believe his luck – sees himself in a kind of harem with his ladies getting along together all sweetness and light. There are only two so far – but later who knows? Everyone happy and without a care in the world. (*To her husband*) Is that what you'd like? But it's not like that! There are attacks of nerves, bouts of anxiety – then they start popping pills and they're off to the analyst and the looney bin. It's no go. Lots have tried and failed.

MAN: Who gives a damn? When others fail and fall flat on their faces that's when we have a real go at it, start from the beginning again.

WOMAN: Invent open marriage from scratch! Get out! (*To the public*) But in the end he convinced me. To defend our marriage, our friendship, our privacy, our bed has to go public. There's the problem of the children. Oh, the children will understand, said he. To be able to talk, to discuss, argue, give advice to each other we had to make love

'elsewhere'. Incredible as it may seem it was my son, Robert, who gave me the courage to try. (*When she plays the part of the son she takes on the blasé attitude of youth today – when she plays herself she takes on the mannerism of an embarrassed mother*) 'Mum, that's enough. You two can't go on like this. You've got to come up with something else. To begin with you can't go on living like some sort of extension of Dad's. You've got to have your own life. Dad goes after women and you – not for revenge but because it's right, healthy and human – you should find yourself another man.' 'What are you saying, Robert?' I don't know why but I put on a funny accent. 'Mum, don't go on like that. Get yourself a nice man – maybe younger than Dad. Just watch – I'll help you.' 'But Robert, what sort of a way is this to talk to your mother? Look, I'm terribly upset – all of a sweat. How on earth am I supposed – at my age – to start looking for men?' 'No,' he says, 'all you have to do is let it be known you're available. Live your own life, Mum. At least try, Mum!' I couldn't resist that 'Mum' so I tried. First of all I went off to live by myself, here. I took all the clothes I got since I was married and threw them away. Then I rushed off to get a new wardrobe. I bought way-out pants and ridiculous skirts.

MAN: I see. You turned yourself into a typical modern idiot.

WOMAN: That's right! My husband's idea of elegance is a woman who gets her clothes at Laura Ashley's. She may be very elegant but she doesn't have to find herself a boy-friend – but I do darling! I changed my way of dressing – then my make-up – purple! I looked horrible. Then my hair – a crazy cut. Punk! All my hair standing on end. I looked like an ad for . . . And the way I walked! Because you all know what a state we get into when our husbands cheat us – when they don't want us any more. SAD! Ugly! We cry. We get round-shouldered. Take me for example – before it happened I had completely forgotten that I had thighs. Abandoned yes – but I had thighs didn't I? I walked without the slightest wiggle. Stiff like a board. I clumped along. (*She takes a few*

steps) Like this. Like an arthritic camel. I kept looking at the ground – I don't know why – all I ever found was dog-shit. What a time that was. The incredible thing is that the moment I forced myself to loosen up a little, to pay some attention to myself, to return friendly glances – well, I found what I wanted. They fell into my arms – after a while I had quite a crisis. First of all because they were almost all younger than me. What were they looking for? A second mother for an oedipal relationship! I fell for it once. There was this chap – but handsome – so handsome – eyes? – he seemed to have more than two – blue they were – and hundreds of teeth! Madly in love. He wept. He rang me up. I lifted the receiver. All I could hear were sobs. I'm – I'm only a mother. One day I said to him: 'OK darling' and made a date – right out in the suburbs – frightened I'd be seen. I actually thought of putting on a false nose. I arrived all churned up – like an idiot. With my heart going TOM TOM. We sit down. Along comes the waiter. 'What will madam have? And your son?' That was it. 'A double whiskey, please – he'll have a lemonade with a straw.' Yes. there were men of my age too – maybe it's my luck – but the ones that came my way were so sad, so beaten, deserted, betrayed by wives and lovers, by their children and grandchildren.

MAN: You mean – you had a terrific time.

WOMAN: Instead – this husband of mine – the moment I gave him the OK – 'Off you go – we're an open couple – make love as much as you like' – You should have seen him!

MAN: Well, yes. It was the effect of that 'open couple'. I didn't feel got at any more by a guilt complex. I was free!

WOMAN: I had a terrific attack of paranoia but he was walking on air. He took off! When we met he used to tell me how he was getting on.

MAN: But, love, forgive me but it was you who always asked me to tell you things – so I told you.

WOMAN: Yes, I'm a masochist. This was when he was having

a relation with a woman – a girl of about thirty but terribly intelligent and liberated – left-wing intellectual – you know the type.

MAN: Yes, she was an intellectual – but why do you say it with that contemptuous voice?

WOMAN: Me? Contemptuous of an intellectual? On the contrary, I was honoured to have one in the house. There was only one week that was a bit heavy-going. She had been in New York. Suddenly she didn't speak her own language any more. 'Say, can I have some cawfee,' 'Have a nice day,' 'You're welcome'. It wasn't as if he fell in love with women of 80. Then it would have been understandable. 'Poor boy, he had an unhappy childhood. He needs his granny. Sit her down there with her knitting.' But this girl – he said to me: 'She's not very pretty but she has a lot of charm. When she's sitting down she exudes sexuality – from her ears!'

MAN: That's mean.

WOMAN: She loved him in quite a different way from – not possessively. In fact she had another man and he had a relationship with another woman and she was married to another man who – a daisy-chain of open couples. But what a job. They needed a computer. X has a date with Y on Monday, Y had a date with Z on Tuesday. Such a business! Then of course – he was very active – he was always away from home. He was only ever there to eat. And at the same time he was carrying on with a very pretty young girl – very nice – always eating something. Ice-creams – even in winter. It was a kind of joke for him. She was still at school and he helped her with her homework.

MAN: Yes, it was a kind of game. I really played with that girl.

WOMAN: Oh yes, they played – hide-and-seek under the sheets. He told me.

MAN: I like her because she's crazy, unpredictable, has tantrums, laughs, throws up ice-cream in lumps. She makes me feel young too – and fatherly at the same time.

WOMAN: A boy-father!

MAN: That's cheap!

WOMAN: 'Watch out that she doesn't get pregnant' I told him. 'Of course', he says, 'watch out but I can't be there to keep an eye on her when she goes out with other boys. She doesn't like that.' Isn't that right?

MAN: Yes, but it was only a joke. It's obvious.

WOMAN: (*To the audience*) One day my husband comes to me all embarrassed and says:

MAN: Listen, this is women's stuff – why don't you go with Paula –

WOMAN: That was the ice-cream girl.

MAN: To the gynaecologist and get her fitted with a coil. Maybe you can convince her – she'll go with you – that's for sure.

WOMAN: Yes, of course I'll be mummy to little Paula – of course I'll take her to the gynaecologist. 'Doctor, please fit my husband's girl-friend with a coil.' Let's hope he's got as good a sense of humour as we have. I'll fit you with a coil. In your foreskin!

MAN: (*To the audience*) You see how she reacted. And that's nothing. (*To his wife*) Go on – tell them what you did!

WOMAN: Yes, I admit I did react. I'd just finished opening a tin of peeled tomatoes – a 5 kilo one. I poured it over his head and pushed the tin down till it came to his chin – like that. He looked like Sir Lancelot ready for the tournament – sponsored by Buitoni. Then I took advantage of his momentary embarrassment and pushed his hand into the toaster. (*She laughs*) It was on.

MAN: Look – I've still got the marks. I looked like a toasted sandwich. I walked about with lettuce leaves between my fingers so that people wouldn't notice. (*To the audience*) Then the shouts, the insults – a fine open couple – a democratic one.

WOMAN: Well, what did you expect? I had taken huge steps towards centrifugal sexual freedom – but what a nerve! to

want me to play nanny to his baby dolls. I don't know what came over him. He didn't use to be like that. A man possessed. He leapt from one woman to another at the speed of light. I've talked to other women, friends of mine – I did a bit of research. Their husbands are always randy too. It must be a virus – the randicoccus. Even our porter's wife – he's randy – always looking for it. But the fact is that my husband doesn't only look for it, he finds it. He's got a mania. Like those people who look for mushrooms – only one thing on their minds – always going to the woods and collecting masses of them. And then they pickle them! Or dry them. Only he collects – birds, chicks, pussies. I swear – it's got to be an obsession with me. I've gone mad. I kept seeing the house full of female sex organs – used and thrown away! I go into the bathroom and instead of a cake of soap – 'It's a pussy!' I put on my shoes. 'Help – there's a mouse!' No, it's a pussy. There are young ones, intelligent ones, stupid ones, good and bad ones, huge ones, thin ones and fat ones. How do I keep them alive? I water them. I get the right stuff to keep them alive from the sperm bank where my husband is an honorary member.

MAN: This is too much. I'm not putting up with any more. Just to please a handful of hardline fanatical anti-male feminist friends of yours you're lynching me!

WOMAN: OK, maybe I've exaggerated for effect. A bit.

MAN: A bit! Here I am reduced to a caricature of a guy who collects mushrooms. The classical example of the penis-dominated sex-maniac and absolutely incapable of any feelings – bang-bang, thank you ma'am! But you took good care not to mention that, for example, I go out with a lot of these women just to talk and not necessarily to go to bed.

WOMAN: But it was you that was always talking to me about sex!

MAN: Yes, of course, because I know for sure that if I tell you that between you and me it's mostly a feeling of closeness you'll get even crosser.

WOMAN: Yes. Maybe. I have to admit that every time I told him about my idiotic moralistic block – about how impossible it was to have a relationship with other men – he gave me a push – like a real comrade, a really understanding friend.

MAN: Now you've discovered I'm not the right man for you, make yourself a new life. You must find a nice man – you deserve it! You're an extraordinary woman – intelligent, generous, fascinating.

WOMAN: (*To the audience*) Dynasty! (*To her husband*) No – please! I can't. I'm all right like this. If you don't want to stay with me, I'd rather be alone – I'm quite calm – believe me. I'm OK here in my own house. I feel good.

MAN: (*To the audience*) And then she would burst out crying and threaten to kill herself.

The WOMAN jumps up onto the window-sill again clutching the gun.

Stop! What's got into you now? Be reasonable – don't be an idiot! (*He tries to stop her by catching her skirt which he pulls down to her feet*)

WOMAN: Don't make me die without a skirt on! I want to die! I can't go on. I'm sorry I keep involving you and putting you through all this. But this time I'm really going to finish things. I'm going to jump and while I'm falling I'll shoot myself.

MAN: No, Antonia! Why don't you try to look at things with a little detachment – behave like a normal person.

WOMAN: (*Gets down from the window and turns to the audience*) So the day came when I finally behaved like a normal person. I got a job. I was fed up with being a domestic martyr. Out! I said. So I went out and found a job – an important one. In the morning you leave the house and take your nice bus. You've no idea how many people you know on a bus. No one! But just to see all these people – squashed together. They pick your pocket. You don't feel

alone any more. Whereas at home I was as lonely as a dog. Me and the telly. The commercials. (*TV jingle needed here*) . . . So I went out in the evenings too – to a drug-addiction centre. Meanwhile he – by the way he hadn't stopped coming round my place even with all those great loves of his – noticed that I was getting more relaxed from day to day.

MAN: Well, what surprised me most of all was that you weren't interested any more in the stories of my adventures.

WOMAN: So to make up for it you kept asking me – (*To the audience*) There was a hail of questions – he wanted to know if I'd made anyone –

MAN: And she always denied it –

WOMAN: I didn't deny it so much as avoid the question as you did to begin with – remember? It was natural reticence. Your husband is your husband after all! (*To the audience*) But one day I made up my mind – told him everything. (*To her husband*) You know, darling, maybe I've found 'Mr Right'.

MAN: Oh yes! Who is he?

WOMAN: Said he and stopped breathing just like that.

MAN: (*Annoyed*) Naturally – you caught me on the wrong foot. I felt a pang in the stomach and my belly swelled up –

WOMAN: (*To the audience*) Of course – I'd forgotten. My husband has a terrible ailment. Aerofagia nervosa. When he has a strong emotion – I was even worried on our wedding day – his stomach swells up and – prot – prot – prot! That's with me. Prit – prit. With the others he sings.

MAN: Shut up, will you? When you're at it why don't you let them hear it in stereo, PROT PROT PROT. But I swear – deep down I was very happy for you.

WOMAN: Very deep down. So deep there was no sign of it.

MAN: First of all I gave you a hug right away – you've got to admit it – and with passion.

WOMAN: Too much – but let's play the scene for them.

MAN: Yes, we were playing cards. I was banker. (*They sit at the table to play rummy*)

WOMAN: It's my cue and I say: You know, darling, maybe I've found Mr Right!

MAN: Delighted to hear it. I'm really terribly pleased for you. (*He mixes the cards and ends up by letting them fall*)

WOMAN: That was the first time he dropped them.

MAN: Mr Right? At last! Who is he, then? What does he do? (*He picks up the cards*)

WOMAN: I bet you can't guess. To begin with, he's not anyone you know.

MAN: Really? Well, I prefer it that way.

WOMAN: He's a professor – of physics.

MAN: A don! You know, you mustn't be carried away by appearances.

WOMAN: Hold on! He has a chair in the university.

MAN: With tenure! Wow!

WOMAN: And he's doing research on nuclear energy – for the Atomic Energy Commission.

MAN: Nuclear energy! (*He lets the cards fall again*)

WOMAN: That was the second time.

MAN: Very interesting. So you'll have learned all there is to know about the safety and social advantages of our nuclear power stations. He'll have convinced you the safest place to install a new megawatt nuclear station is up there – at Dounreay.

WOMAN: (*Ironically*) I'm sorry to disappoint you but he is opposed to all those nuclear power stations they're putting up. He says they're out of date – built with stuff the Americans discarded – really dangerous junk – and that our rulers are real villains because they've let themselves be corrupted – but above all they're dangerous because they're idiots. Who is this man? One of his colleagues tells me he's

indispensable – otherwise they'd have got rid of him long ago.

MAN: Indispensable? He must be very brainy.

WOMAN: Yes, he's a member of Mensa – but he doesn't give himself airs. He's sensitive and intelligent. The things he says – they ought to be preserved for posterity. When he comes out with one of them he sort of looks away and I take out a notebook and write it all down. The other evening he said: 'There's no doubt that the lowest level of intelligence is that of the politicians – but we scientists are close seconds – that was how we thought up Hiroshima together!'

MAN: He certainly sticks his neck out!

WOMAN: He's got guts – nuclear guts – he's politicised – witty – he makes me lose my head – we spend some wonderful days together. Then I found he's been nominated for a Nobel prize. (*She lays her hand on the table*) Rummy!

MAN: Just imagine – my wife's lover almost a Nobel prizewinner! It's great to find you have a genius in the family. I'm very honoured.

WOMAN: Yes, but last time you weren't so laid back about it. You said it out of the side of your mouth, 'I'm very honoured.'

MAN: I hope you won't mind an indiscreet question – have you ever been together – I mean, have you made love yet?

WOMAN: And when he asked this question this laid-back, liberated husband – the male half of the open couple – had another attack of his ailment. Prot Prot.

MAN: Cut out the details. I got short of breath. But answer my question.

WOMAN: I'd like to be able to say Yes – but it's No!

MAN: (*With ill-concealed satisfaction*) No love-making. Is there something wrong?

WOMAN: No, nothing. I like him a lot – I'd like to very much. But I don't feel like it yet. He was amazing – he understood at once –

MAN: Understood? What did he understand?

WOMAN: That I didn't feel comfortable about it. 'Urania,' he said . . .

MAN: Why 'Urania'? Aren't you called Antonia any more?

WOMAN: Yes, but he calls me Urania which is the core element of Plutonium. He's a physicist – do you want him to call me 'darling'? 'Urania,' he said, 'this thing of ours is too important to rush it. We need a breathing-space.' 'Yes,' I added, 'if not there's the risk it will just be a quick fuck and that's all. It happened to me once before – and I felt like an old rag afterwards.'

MAN: When was this quick fuck? You didn't tell me about it.

WOMAN: Well, it was an unimportant relationship – believe me – just a sexual thing that's all.

MAN: Are you sending me up? That's one of my lines.

WOMAN: It's certainly not one of mine – you know that if there's no love I feel empty – sad.

MAN: And who was it made you empty and sad?

WOMAN: Does it matter?

MAN: Yes, it does. I've always told you all about me.

WOMAN: Well, I don't. I'm reserved. Even with the professor I had problems talking about it.

MAN: Ah, so you told him!

WOMAN: Yes, I did. I feel it's right and honest not to hide anything from him. To show him myself as I am.

MAN: While with me you can show yourself as you aren't.
(*Changing tone*) So it's serious with the atomic expert?

WOMAN: Yes, I think so. Why? Would you rather it was a big joke?

MAN: But why? It was me that advised you – told you how to behave. I'm a civilised person too – democratic and understanding. (*He gives a shriek*) Aaaaah! I'm an idiot.

Look at this – I'm sweating all over. I feel like the original example of the male shit.

WOMAN: Ah you see, one has to admit – the open couple has its disadvantages. Rule Number 1: For the open couple to work properly only one part of it has to be open. Because if it's open on both sides then there are terrible draughts.

MAN: You're right. I feel fine so long as I can chuck you over. I use you, discard you, but if anyone dares pick you up – watch out! If some bastard notices that your wife is still attractive – even if she's been abandoned – and wants her and appreciates her – then it gnaws away at you till you go mad. And into the bargain you discover that the bastard who picks her up is more intelligent, has any number of degrees, is witty – democratic!

WOMAN: Don't put yourself down like that.

MAN: Damn it – all that's missing is for him to play the guitar and sing rock.

WOMAN: You know him then?

MAN: Know who?

WOMAN: The professor. You've had me followed.

MAN: Followed! What are you saying?

WOMAN: Then how do you know that he plays the guitar and sings rock music?

MAN: He really does?

WOMAN: Who told you?

MAN: No one. I just came out with it – I guessed. God damn it! a singing atomic scientist! And I've no ear for music. In any case a man his age who tries to sing like X . . .

WOMAN: What do you mean, of his age? He is thirty-eight. Eight years younger than you. And he doesn't copy X – he has a style of his own. He plays the guitar – the piano – the trumpet – can do American slang . . .

MAN: Ah, so he can do American slang. He's a don at

Cambridge and an adviser to the Atomic Energy Corporation. I expect he's a Vegan as well.

WOMAN: And he writes music too –

MAN: I was just saying to myself: 'I wonder if he writes music?'

WOMAN: Yes, words and music. He's had a couple of hits. You know the one that goes – 'a woman without a man is like a fish without a bicycle' – the one that what's her name sings.

MAN: He wrote that!

WOMAN: Yes!

MAN: He writes feminist songs. I never could stand male feminists. Specially when they're thirty-eight.

WOMAN: But it's an ironical song – he's sending up trendy feminism. He wrote one and dedicated it to me. I'm a bit shy about it – but you and I – we're very close – if you like I'll try to sing it.

MAN: Why don't you go on being shy?

WOMAN: I'm glad you didn't insist. I'd have felt terribly embarrassed singing a song to my husband that my new man wrote for me. Wait – I've taped it. (*She turns on the tape-machine*)

and you were there
 you still hadn't dialled the number
 to put you through to my love
 and you were there – so beautiful
 On the monitor of my thoughts
 you appeared
 with the speed of a telex –
 marvellous interference –
 so lovely
 you blew all my circuits
 you blew all my circuits – oh yeah!

MAN: That's great. But you'd think it had been written by the speaking clock and not an atomic physicist.

WOMAN: You're right. I had not thought about it. I'll tell him the moment I see him.

MAN: When are you seeing him?

WOMAN: In a minute – at lunch.

MAN: At lunch – already?

WOMAN: Yes, we're spending the weekend together. Do you mind? I've only an hour to get ready.

MAN: But damn it, if he's so important to you – if you get on together – why don't you go and live with him?

WOMAN: Not on your life! I'm not going to be an idiot again and set up with a man. I've had enough of that!

MAN: Not even if – it's just a suggestion – I was to propose it myself?

WOMAN: Never! I'm sorry but I've gone through too much. What's up with you? Don't you feel well? You've been biting your nails for the last hour. You're almost down to the knuckles, my darling. Why don't you have a drop of vodka?

MAN: It's disgusting.

WOMAN: Vodka?

MAN: No – vodka's all right. I'm disgusted with myself. But I asked for it – there's nothing I can do about it. It was me that suggested being an open couple and I can't expect you to go back on it just because I'm fed up with the whole thing. You have an absolute right to organise your own life. God, what balls I'm talking. But, tell me, doesn't rock make you want to throw up? You used to say it was stuff for mental defects and psychopaths. The moment you heard that bam-bam-batapang you got a pain in the stomach.

WOMAN: Yes, that's true. It was a classical case of the total rejection of anything new – anything you can't understand.

MAN: I suppose you like it now because it's in. Because you're carrying on like a teenager – and the professor plays it. All

this post-modernist stuff. The truth is – he put you on the right path.

WOMAN: Of course – if a woman improves her mind, transforms herself, there has always to be a man behind it – the latest Pygmalion. What an idiotic idea! (*The telephone rings*)

MAN: If it's one of my girl-friends say I'm not in, I've gone out.

WOMAN: Why?

MAN: Never mind – I just don't feel like talking –

WOMAN: He's holding out on the harem. (*She takes the phone. She is excited*) Hi, it's you. Why on earth? Am I late? You gave me such a fright. (*To her husband*) It's him.

MAN: Who?

WOMAN: Oh piss off. (*To the phone*) Yes, I'm almost ready. You're coming over? Half-an-hour. (*Embarrassed*) No, of course I'm alone. Absolutely. I'll be waiting. Yes, I do. Yes, so much. All right I'll spell it out. I love you so much. Bye-bye. (*She slams down the receiver. Furiously*) You could at least not stand there looking at me with these eyes. You made me terribly embarrassed.

MAN: Why did you say you were alone? Was it too much for you to say I was there?

WOMAN: No. Yes! you're right – it was too much.

MAN: I see. So the Brain is jealous.

WOMAN: Jealous? Don't talk bilge. Drink up your vodka and get out.

MAN: Why?

WOMAN: Didn't you hear? He's coming any minute.

MAN: What is this? Are we swopping roles now? The husband who has to clear out so that the lover doesn't find him there! So it's true. He's jealous of me!

WOMAN: He's not jealous. I just don't want you to meet.

MAN: I see – you're afraid I'll sus out that he's not what you've cracked him up to be. That I won't like him: 'Is that all there is to him? What a let-down!'

WOMAN: What I'm really afraid of is that he won't like you – that you'll be the let-down.

MAN: What do you mean?

WOMAN: Well, you see I painted a very flattering portrait of you – I said you were an extraordinarily intelligent man, witty, open-minded, generous –

MAN: I suppose you mean I'm not –

WOMAN: No, for goodness' sake, you have your points – even you have some. But you see – well – I exaggerated a little. It wasn't exactly a true likeness. Of course everyone has their weaknesses. I like you with all your shortcomings. We've known each other for ages. You were my first big love – but now I'm so totally changed people who know me now can't imagine how I lived with you for so long.

MAN: I didn't notice anything. Do you realise how nasty you are being to me? Who do you think you are?

WOMAN: A different woman, darling.

MAN: Yes – but that means you've gone round the bend. You've blown your mind going alone – with these Brains, these intellectual snobs that write rock lyrics. But I don't give a damn for you or for your stupid friends with brains coming out of their ears.

WOMAN: Great! But I thought you'd make a scene. Now please go away. In any case I can't stand that thing you've got round your neck. You look like something out of a Thirties film.

MAN: Shut up! shut up! I can't take it any more! (*He comes up behind the WOMAN and putting his scarf round her neck tries to strangle her*)

WOMAN: What the hell are you doing? Are you out of your mind? Bastard! Coming to my house to make me commit suicide.

MAN: It's your own fault. You keep on provoking me. Don't you see – I felt like killing you.

WOMAN: It did cross my mind. But calm down. Look at your stomach – it's swelling. If you're ashamed to go into the bathroom just get rid of it here. It's only hot air after all. Anyway I'm just like your mother. I'll put on a nice record, then you can relax.

MAN: Stop it! You're a bitch.

WOMAN: So I'm a bitch! I try to laugh things off – to cool it so that you don't feel guilty. OK – do you want to hear the truth? I am dying with fright. You should have seen the eyes you made. You looked like the Pope when people talk about contraceptives.

MAN: Sure – I can imagine. But I felt so got at. The idea that you wanted to leave me for good. I felt so desperate. Antonia – I love you. (*He tries to embrace her*)

WOMAN: Stop! I'm suffocating.

MAN: Take your clothes off – please. Give me a kiss.

WOMAN: Yes, I'll give you a kiss – but wait a minute. You're splitting my dress – and breaking my ribs.

MAN: Let's make love. (*He takes off her skirt and boots*)

WOMAN: Here? Now? But I was going out, darling. I have a date.

MAN: Yes – now – this minute. Let's make love. I'll help you to get your clothes off. (*He makes her lie on the table*)

WOMAN: The telephone! (*He takes the telephone out from under her back*)

MAN: Hello? There's no one there. I need you to prove to me –

WOMAN: Prove what?

MAN: That I still mean something to you. (*He unzips his trousers and begins to take them off*)

WOMAN: You're right. It's a question of pride for you. Yes, I love you. I've been longing for this moment. I love you. . . . You're the only one. You're the greatest bastard on earth!

MAN: You really have gone out of your mind!

WOMAN: Just look at yourself. With your pants – you're a sight! Who do you think you are?

MAN: But I love you. After all what have I done? I only wanted to make love to you.

WOMAN: So that's all he wanted! For years now you didn't even know I existed. You didn't even see me. And now that there's this atomic scientist . . . the atomic peril – we have to make love right away on the small table. With the telephone sticking into my back! And then he talks about an open couple! No – all you want is to get possession of what is yours by law. You can lend me out if the conditions are spelled-out clearly but never let go of me. If you could you'd brand me on the bottom with a red-hot iron – like a cow.

MAN: Now you're exaggerating – on the wrist would do. You're talking like one of those old-hat feminists. What are you doing – getting dressed? So you really don't want to? But that means it's really finished. Curtains! May I know what's got into you?

WOMAN: Who knows what's got into me.

MAN: You seem to me to have shot off at a tangent. You seem to have become – I don't know what to call it – I know! – a complete stranger – something from another world. I love you just as much as before. Try to come to yourself again. The person who insults me – who swears at me – who tries to throw herself out of the window – who shoots at me and misses. That's the Antonia I like best. Come to yourself.

WOMAN: Come to myself? Poor desperate Antonia? Throw yourself out of the window on Thursday – hang yourself on Friday – rest on Sunday. Find your ego. How banal you are! All that stupid rational crap! 'No I can't come out today – I'm looking for my real self.' My ego. Who's got at my ego?

It was here – next to the telephone. I can't find it any more. Who's taken it? Excuse, but didn't you see my real self going past? Yes – my real self – it was on a bicycle with its oedipus complex on the crossbar.

MAN: Listen to her – just listen. What irony – what language – what a vocabulary! And then she gets pissed off if I say she's learned it all from that professor. Do you mind telling me one thing – how did you get to know him?

WOMAN: Through his daughter.

MAN: So the Brain has a daughter.

WOMAN: Yes – she's fifteen. I knew her already from the committee on drug addicts.

MAN: You mean one of the girls that works along with you.

WOMAN: No, she's the drug addict.

MAN: She's hooked?

WOMAN: Yes, we're trying to get her off with Methadone. But it's difficult. I got to know her father through her.

MAN: (*With ill-concealed pleasure*) The professor has a fifteen-year-old daughter who takes drugs?

WOMAN: Did you hear how you said that?

MAN: How?

WOMAN: Look – I know you. You almost sounded pleased.

MAN: What at?

WOMAN: At finding out the professor has a drug addict for a daughter.

MAN: You're mad – as if I –

WOMAN: Look me in the eyes!

MAN: OK then – it's true. Spit in my face if you like – you're right – I am a worm. This prof. was beginning to get on my tits – too good to be true – young, witty, bang up-to-date with everything – everything about him the tops. Oh but at last he's fallen down over something.

WOMAN: No, it's you that has fallen down. Do you know what you are?

MAN: Don't tell me. I know it all. I know that today to manage to bring up a child without its being warped by violence – or getting mixed up with drugs – it's like winning the pools – and just as possible.

WOMAN: Well then?

MAN: I'm disgusted with myself – I have to admit it. But still I was pleased. The rich sweet pleasure of the reactionary!

WOMAN: You should be ashamed of yourself. Who was this I married? If you'd got to know him the way I did! He was an empty shell, grey – he seemed done in.

MAN: Really! I'm beginning to like him.

WOMAN: He was desperate. 'I haven't given this child of mine anything – never – a few hugs, silly things – but real affection – I never even tried. I always thought about myself – only myself – and about my career.'

MAN: And you said to him: 'No – don't say that, professor! It's not your fault – it's society's fault.'

WOMAN: Listen – don't start sending me up.

MAN: Didn't you console him, then?

WOMAN: If anyone needed to be consoled then it was me.

MAN: So you kept each other company?

WOMAN: More or less. Then one day I said: 'Listen – don't let's go on weeping and wringing our hands.' We were talking about missiles – about Molesworth and disarmament and we were saying how little people care. 'What about us,' I said, 'it's not as if we do much!' 'Let's go on the next demo.'

MAN: When was this?

WOMAN: A month ago.

MAN: I'm sorry – but didn't you go to Cheltenham to see that cousin of yours who got herself pregnant and had to have an abortion?

WOMAN: That was the story for the husband.

MAN: OK. Apart from the fact that you really disappoint me – you two intellectual snobs – caught up in protest politics and out to Molesworth along with a bunch of left-over hippies. And a dozen lunatic masochists who want to get beaten up by the police.

WOMAN: You really are reactionary!

MAN: What do you mean reactionary? No one believes in demos like that any more, the real Left keeps clear of them.

WOMAN: What do you mean keeps clear of them! What about the last CND demo in Trafalgar Square?

MAN: Another big cosy get-together – sort of carnival – that's OK in London but who's going to go to Molesworth? A couple of MPs from the Labour Left – some Euro communists and a load of feminists.

WOMAN: That's just what we thought. 'Let's go along anyway.'

MAN: So how did you go?

WOMAN: Motorbike.

MAN: You must have been keen!

WOMAN: Why keen? Motorcycling's a hobby like any other.

MAN: Maybe I can see you – with all the gear – boots, leather jacket, helmet, on a roaring Suzuki.

WOMAN: You're wrong. It was a Guzzi.

MAN: So he's mad about Italy. With you huddled up at the back. Go on, tell me the rest.

WOMAN: We stopped off at Lincoln.

MAN: Lincoln! That was a bit out of your way.

WOMAN: We sort of didn't feel like the demo any more. It's not as if the danger of atomic war has really got to the masses. And Lincoln is lovely. Remember we went there once.

MAN: I remember.

WOMAN: This was different. So lovely. We walked about. Looked at the cathedral. Had a meal at that restaurant – it's in the Good Food Guide –

MAN: Board and lodging. But even then you didn't manage to make love.

WOMAN: Why? How do you know?

MAN: You told me a while ago. How you felt inhibited.

WOMAN: But only as far as York.

MAN: A tour of the cathedral towns! So you lost your inhibitions in York.

WOMAN: It was marvellous. In a bed and breakfast. The professor wanted to buy the bed – but the landlady wouldn't sell it. Good heavens – what's the time? It's more than half an hour since he called. Damn it – it's your fault, making me chatter on like an idiot. Come on – on your way. No, not that way – go out by the back door. I don't want you to risk meeting him on the stairs.

MAN: So you're going to throw me out by the back door. I used to be your husband – now I'm the milkman.

WOMAN: All right – if you're so easily hurt go out any way you like but put a move on!

MAN: No.

WOMAN: What do you mean No?

MAN: I'm not moving from here. I've had second thoughts. I'm going to wait for him. I want to see him face to face.

WOMAN: Please – don't spoil everything. Get out.

MAN: No!

WOMAN: Are you out of your mind? You promised.

MAN: I didn't promise any damn thing. It is my inalienable right to meet the lover of my wife. I want to look him in the eyes and if, when he looks at me, he so much as moves a

muscle of his face – contemptuous like – and does the rock-musician bit I'll smash his guitar over his head.

WOMAN: You're a bastard. I mean to say – first you do everything to make me go along with this disgusting idea of the open couple – so as to be modern and civilised. It makes me want to throw up but – I go along with it to make you happy. I feel bad about it but you go on and on at me and I get round to the idea of looking for a man. I find one. I like him. I fall in love and now, you bastard, you have to wreck everything for me and let him see you as you are – a miserable disgusting creep. And then you want to break his electric guitar as well. Why don't you say you wish I was dead. All right – you know what? This time I'll really do it. The gas – I'll turn on the gas. (*She runs to the kitchen*)

MAN: (*Stopping her*) Stop! Don't waste gas. I'm going – but by the window so you won't have to go through with having to introduce me – if that's what's worrying you. But this time it's for good! (*He climbs onto the window-sill*)

WOMAN: Don't be an idiot! Get down from there. You're simply ridiculous.

MAN: What do you mean – when you get up on the window-sill it's tragic – it's high drama. I get up and it's ridiculous and embarrassing.

WOMAN: That's right – it's a question of style. Come on – get down!

MAN: What else can I do? If you don't play along there's no drama in it. I always gave you a hand – caught you by the ankle – begged you –

WOMAN: But how am I holding you back – how? Because if you jump you're so overweight you'll take me with you. And just now I don't want to die for real. Come on – get down. Think of your funeral. It'd be like a demo. All your women behind the hearse. Think how unpleasant it would be – all pushing and shoving to show how cut up they were. A couple jump into the grave – the one with the ice-cream weeping all over the coffin.

MAN: OK, go on taking the piss! (*He gets down from the window*) All right – now you'll see (*He seizes the gun*) when you made your scene it was almost empty – but this time I've put the bullets in – now it's loaded. (*He fills the magazine*)

WOMAN: But why waste them all? One will do. Give over – was I as silly-looking as that? Hand it over – don't be a lunatic. You really might let one off. (*Tries to get the gun from him*)

MAN: Let go – I'm going to shoot myself. (*A shot goes off*)

WOMAN: Idiot. You fired.

MAN: OK – no harm done. It missed.

WOMAN: What do you mean missed? It hit me right in the foot.

MAN: Oh I'm sorry. (*Passes her the crutch*)

WOMAN: The great thing about this house is that everything's laid on. There's always a crutch handy. You're a disaster. You're useless. You can't even commit suicide without dragging your wife into it.

MAN: You're right. I'm a washout.

WOMAN: Listen, washout. Since I'm bleeding and, apart from anything else making a mess of the carpet, would you mind going to the bathroom and getting me a towel – a bandage – anything.

MAN: Sure – right away. Just as well – can only be a graze. (*He goes to the bathroom. There's a sound of running water. He comes back with a towel, a bandage, disinfectant etc*)

WOMAN: Yes, it's just a scratch – just like in a film – the heroine is never badly wounded – otherwise – I'm pleased because the treatment for this sort of wound is very slimming! Did I hear you turn on the bath?

MAN: Yes, I did.

WOMAN: Why? If you feel like having a bath then go home.

MAN: At home I don't have a bath and the shower doesn't work.

WOMAN: What doesn't work? That's enough – I've had it. Get out. Can't you understand I don't want him to find you here?

MAN: But I won't be in the way – you see. When the Brain of Britain arrives he can help you to pull me out of the bath.

WOMAN: Look – I've got other things to do with the Brain of Britain – as you call him – in any case why should the two of us pull you out of the bath?

MAN: Because you wouldn't manage alone. Corpses are heavy.

WOMAN: That's great – my husband drowns himself in my bath. With my plastic flowered cap on his head to stop getting his hair wet! Listen – to drown in my bath you need a superhuman effort. Just think – to lie down under the water with your nose plugged and suffocate yourself – that takes guts. You wouldn't manage, being you!

MAN: Don't worry. I've had another idea. Once I'm in the bath with the hair-dryer in my hand all I have to do is to press that button there and Boom! There's a tremendous flash and that's that. Electrocuted.

WOMAN: So you saw *Goldfinger* the other evening on Channel Four.

MAN: I don't need a film or a professor of physics to give me ideas – I get them on my own!

WOMAN: Shitty ideas!

MAN: All right. Excuse me a minute, I have to get ready. (*He goes into the bathroom*) I have to undress.

WOMAN: You're going to commit suicide in the nude.

MAN: Certainly – I have a certain style. I don't suppose you want me to get into the bath with jacket and trousers on . . . (*He shuts the bathroom door*)

WOMAN: (*Knocking on the door*) Stop playing the silly ass and come out of there. All right – maybe I did make mistakes, I went a bit far humiliating you like that. Come

out. Talk it over. Let's discuss things like civilised people. Come out. (*She squints through the keyhole*)

MAN: It's too late, love. And don't peep. Aren't you ashamed?

WOMAN: He's mad. He really has plugged in the hair-dryer. Stop!

MAN: Sure. That way you'll learn not to humiliate me. I want to die. God, the water's cold. Doesn't the boiler work in this house?

WOMAN: Stop. It's not true – any of it. I made it all up. The professor doesn't exist.

MAN: (*Puts his head round the door*) So you made up the Brain of Britain. And when the telephone rang a little while ago you did it all by ventriloquism, is that it? (*He comes in wrapped up more or less in a towel. He has the dryer in his hand and points it at his wife*)

WOMAN: But there was someone on the line – only they had got the wrong number and rang off. I went on pretending it was him.

MAN: My compliments on your acting. But it doesn't hold water. You're trying to distract me and make me lose time – so the professor will arrive shortly and the two of you will jump on me and stop me. (*He backs away pointing the dryer like a gun*) Stop. Don't come any closer or I'll jump.

WOMAN: For goodness' sakes don't do it with a hair-dryer. I know – let's call the Atomic Energy Commission. I'm going to ring Enquiries and get the number. (*She does so*) I'll have a good laugh when you say: 'Excuse me but have you a head of department who writes rock numbers?' (*On the phone*) Hello – can you give me the number of the Atomic Energy Commission? (*The MAN cuts off the phone*) Aren't you going to speak?

MAN: So I fell for it like an idiot. You really did invent the lot.

WOMAN: Phew – the fright you gave me. Are you feeling a bit calmer now? Relax. It would have been such a tragedy! OK,

I made it all up but I did it to make you see how much a person suffers. Yes, you fell for it but –

MAN: No – you fell for it.

WOMAN: How?

MAN: All that stuff about suicide!

WOMAN: So it was all –

MAN: Look at it – it's burnt out. I just did it to make a scene. I'd no intention of taking a risk and ending up flambé – like some sort of zombie. Darling, I see daylight ahead!

WOMAN: You made it all up?

MAN: Yes – it was a joke. (*Laughs*) Anyway I should say thank you – it was a gas. How does that song go? 'You came up on the telephone . . .'

WOMAN: You're a despicable bastard.

MAN: Stop it, Urania. (*The bell rings*)

MAN: You go. I'm enjoying myself. (*He goes on singing and sending the song up*) 'And you appeared on my screen you blew my circuits.' (*The WOMAN goes to the door. There's a man in his forties. It's the PROFESSOR*)

PROFESSOR: Sorry I'm a little late. (*He kisses her*)

MAN: Who's he?

PROFESSOR: Is this your husband? Am I wrong or was he humming my song?

MAN: Who is he, please?

WOMAN: But, love, who should it be – the rock professor.

MAN: Him. No. The Brain exists. He really does exist! (*He grabs the dryer and rushes into the bathroom. There is an explosion and a huge flash*)

WOMAN: Oh no!